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**INNOVATIONS**

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of tending water and listening at Water Bar in Greensboro, North Carolina, courtesy Shanai Matteson, Works Progress, and Water Bar & Public Studio.

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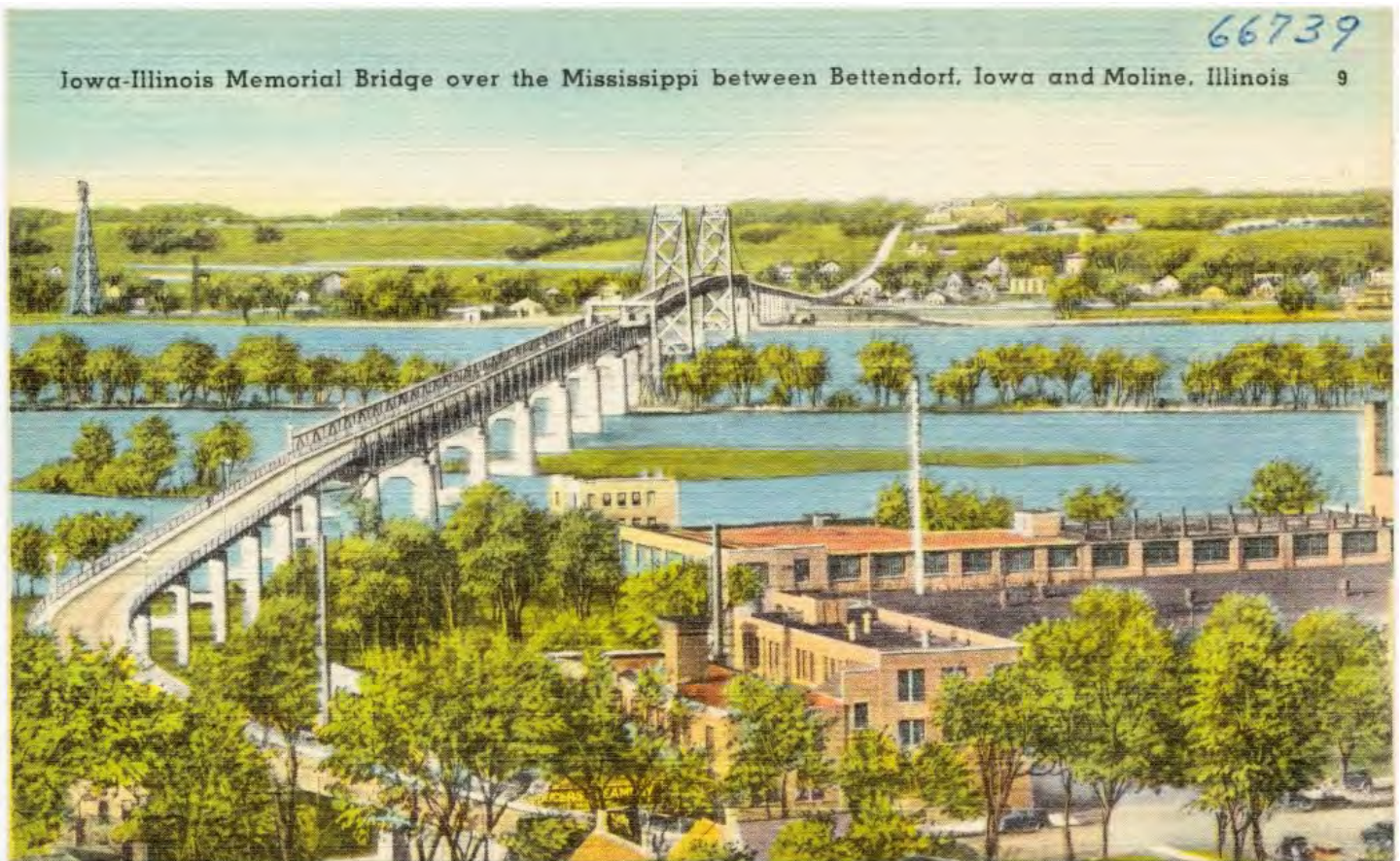
PERSPECTIVES

# IN QUAD CITIES, RECONNECTION TO THE RIVERFRONT IS WELL INTO ITS FOURTH DECADE

By Patrick Nunnally

In January 2018, residents of the Quad Cities (Moline and Rock Island, Illinois; Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa) attended an open house exploring possibilities for “new” riverfront land left vacant by the realignment of the I-74 bridge

over the Mississippi. Bridge replacements happen all the time, of course, but this meeting signaled two things: first, the continued significance of this particular stretch of the Mississippi as a transportation crossroads, and second, the ongoing



*Hand-tinted postcard showing Iowa-Illinois Memorial Bridge over the Mississippi between Bettendorf, Iowa and Moline, Illinois circa 1930-45.*

vitality of the regional riverfront redevelopment programs, begun out of industrial economic crises over three decades ago. The Quad Cities

region, to many people “flyover country” at its very essence, looms surprisingly large in Mississippi River history.

# Why the Quad Cities Are Here- A Nineteenth-Century Perspective

The best single source for this complex set of stories is the book *Grand Excursions on the Upper Mississippi River* (University of Iowa Press, 2004), edited by Curtis C. Roseman and Elizabeth M. Roseman. Much of what follows was learned through discussions with the editors and research for the chapter I wrote in the volume. The settlements that became the Quad Cities grew up at a point where rapids in the Mississippi required steamboats to stop, unload, be piloted very carefully through the rapids and rocky outcroppings in the river, then reloaded. Communities grew up to serve these travelers and shippers and, after a survey by Lt. Robert E. Lee (yes, that Lee) in 1837, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began to blast away rock to form a shipping lane. In the 1840s, blacksmith John Deere relocated his steel plough company to

Moline, to take advantage of waterpower developments there. Today, of course, Deere and Co. is known worldwide as a manufacturer of farm implements and other machinery.

Located almost due west from Chicago, it is not surprising that the first railroad to reach the Mississippi and provide a continuous route from the eastern seaboard would intersect the river at Rock Island, Illinois. The Rock Island line built a timber bridge to carry tracks across the river in 1856, further complicating an already treacherous stretch of water for navigation. Later that year, the steamboat *Effie Afton* crashed into the bridge’s piers; the ensuing fire engulfed both the bridge and the steamboat. Railroad sued steamship company; steamship company sued railroad; and the court case ended up establishing



*I-74 Bridge spanning the Mississippi River between Bettendorf, Iowa and Moline, Illinois.  
Photographer Ctjf83 (CC By-SA 3.0).*

the principal that railroads could legally cross rivers without being considered impediments to navigation. The case, won by railroad lawyer Abraham Lincoln, opened the way for railroad

crossings up and down the Mississippi and, ultimately, the expansion of the United States across the Great Plains.

## In the Late Twentieth Century, a Region Undergoing Change

Fast-forward 130 years from the 1856 *Effie Afton* case, and the Quad Cities region was once again in the national news. This time, a cost-price squeeze of mammoth proportions caused farm bankruptcies all over the Midwest. With thousands of farmers going bankrupt, the ripple effect on farm communities, agricultural implement dealers, and ultimately implement manufacturers was devastating. According to some estimates, industrial leaders in the Quad Cities, like John Deere, J.I. Case, and International Harvester, lost some 25,000 jobs during the 1980s.

Job losses at that scale brought many “rust belt” towns to their knees, and some cars around the Quad Cities sported bumper stickers reading,

“Will the last person leaving the Quad Cities please turn out the lights?” In this case, though, a committed group of community-minded citizens decided that the Mississippi River would be the key to the region’s future, just as it had been central to its past. The year 1984 was marked as the “Year of the River,” with public events held at the riverfront each month. After that year, a new nonprofit organization, [RiverAction](#), was founded to keep the momentum going. In the ensuing decades, led by a remarkably consistent team of staff and Board of Directors, RiverAction has emerged as one of the most effective community-based organizations on the entire Mississippi River.

## The Mississippi River as the Region’s Greatest Asset

One of the keys to RiverAction’s success has been its commitment to broad civic inclusion. It’s not easy to get the mayors of four independent cities to agree on much of anything, and once the riverfront projects expanded from the core cities, the number of local governments grew to over a dozen. There is a BiState Regional Commission that has a regional collaborative infrastructure around issues such as transportation, but RiverAction often found itself taking the lead

on initiatives such as regional bikeways, river cleanups, and the like. Local corporations came to the table, providing funding and in-kind contributions for features such as the trail gateway signs on the RiverWay trail network.

RiverAction has also been masterful at putting together coalitions that secure significant public funding for the region. Some of the largest grants, such as the EPA Superfund cleanup that restored



*The Quad Cities of Rock Island and Moline, Illinois, and Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa, are visible in this east-northeast-looking photograph. The sediment-filled Mississippi River is joined by the Rock River just south of Moline and by the Wapsipinicon River north of the Quad Cities. Image provided by the International Space Station program and the JSC Earth Science & Remote Sensing Unit, ARES Division, Exploration Integration Science Directorate, NASA.*

the Nahant Marsh, could only go to public entities, so a local unit of government had to be persuaded to take the lead. For other projects, a private partner like the Quad Cities regional Chamber of Commerce was the principal grant recipient. Augustana College in Rock Island has been a longtime collaborator, and, more recently, the new campus of Western Illinois University has played a role.

All of this effort has allowed the Quad Cities to participate fully in the national phenomenon of populations returning to previously abandoned downtowns. In the 1990s, several blocks of obsolete warehouses were converted to John Deere Commons, a museum, restaurant, and shopping complex located across the street from a new civic arena for concerts and minor league hockey and basketball games. Visitors mean customers for locally owned restaurants, bars, and shops in the

downtown district. A livelier downtown means that small residential developments have begun to sprout up here and there along the paths and art installations on the riverfront.

Which brings us back to the open houses to get public feedback about the areas around the relocated interstate bridge. The two spans being replaced were built in very different eras—the first one in 1935 and the second in 1960. Yet both were built during a period when the Mississippi was thought of as the “back door” to the Quad Cities, and public participation was not a factor in urban bridge planning and construction. Now, with the Mississippi River once again the “front door” to the Quad Cities, the new bridge, just a few miles away from the location of the first railroad bridge to cross the Mississippi, will once again mark the Quad Cities as a significant river destination.

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Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life Program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and was one of the lead scholars for the University’s John E. Sawyer Seminar, “Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century and Beyond,” funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.